

## Confucianism: The Doctrine of the Mean

Three great system of thought dominate Chinese civilization: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The most dominant is the one founded by Confucius (551-479 BCE). Confucius loved learning, and by age fifteen he had committed his life to a diligent study of the ancient wise men. In addition, he sought a better way and order of doing things. **Learning and knowledge, Confucius believed, must be practical.** They must transform life for the better. The result of his own learning was a system of moral, political, and social precepts bound together by what is best called a **philosophy of nature** and by a faith in the **perfectibility of the human character**.

That the human person is perfectible was a central tenet of Confucius's thinking. **The human person, Confucius believed, is not always good but can become better.** Betterment, he thought, comes through learning and service to others. **No one begins with wisdom, but with diligence and determined study, wisdom can be acquired; and once acquired, wisdom becomes an instrument for perfecting oneself, the family, and society.** Even nature itself, Confucius believed, cannot resist the power of wisdom: "It is man that can make the Way great," he said, "and not the Way that can make man great."

The Way, as mentioned by Confucius, is a key concept in his philosophy. For Confucius, as also for the Taoists, **the Way or Tao** (*tao* means "path" or "way" in English) is basically the path taken by natural events. Confucius uses the word *Way* or *Tao* often and in different senses. There is a way of the good man, a way of music, a way of proper government, and a cosmological way. Confucius even speaks of "my *tao*." Although interpreters are not in total agreement about this, it would seem that the Tao, for Confucius, is not a fixed and eternal transcendental principle that stands outside and above events and determines them. Rather, it is affected in no small part by human thought and human action. "It is man that can make the Way great." One can study the practices of the wise ancients to learn how to make the Way great in one's own time. **Essentially, this means knowing how best to regulate your life.** Confucius set forth ideals of human behavior based on his understanding of the Way. He believed that once you have achieved a knowledge of the Tao or Way of things, you cannot die in vain.

For Confucius, everything "thrive[s] according to its nature." One way in which heaven works, he thought, is through the principle of **the Mean (*chung*)**, **which provides a standard of measure for all things.** Human behavior should avoid extremes and seek moderation. In the philosophy of Confucius, when things function in accordance with this principle of the Mean, they stand in a **relationship of mutual dependence**. In other words, the principle essentially requires reciprocal cooperation among things—between people and between people and nature. And when the principle is followed, things flourish and nourish one another without conflict or injury.

Confucius formulated this **principle of reciprocity** in a general way as it applied to human affairs by saying, **"Do not do to other what you would not want them do to you."** Thus likewise, according to Confucius, "A virtuous man wishing to establish himself seeks also to establish others, and wishing to enlighten himself, seeks also to enlighten others." Just as nature is built on a principle of reciprocal cooperation rather than strife, so reciprocal cooperation must reign in human affairs, he believed.

Another key concept in Confucius's thought is that of the *sage* or superior man. **The sage represents, in effect, an ethical ideal to which humans should aspire.** To achieve the status of sage, Confucius believed, requires having intimate knowledge both of change and of

the order of things; it requires, more specifically, having a correct understanding both of human relationships and the workings of nature. **A correct understanding, according to Confucius, involves, among other things, setting right or *rectifying* what is distorted, and it especially involves the correct use or *rectification* of names.** This means knowing, for example, when it is legitimate to accord someone a title or rank. The sage or superior person, according to Confucius, puts this correct understanding into action and seeks the mutual cooperation that enables others to fulfill their own destiny.

According to Confucius, **the sage's actions are superior to those of other men because his model of behavior is superior.** Specifically, he patterns his behavior on the great men of the past. In addition, he constantly learns from his own personal experience. Confucius said that if he were able to study change for fifty years, he would finally be free of mistakes. Wisdom requires constant learning, and constant learning allows the superior man better to know the measure of things and to perform his duty accordingly.

Thus, the sage, in the philosophy of Confucius, not only thinks correctly, but also lives correctly. Indeed, according to Confucius, for the sage no discrepancy exists between thought (or speech) and action. The sage does not think (or say) one thing and do a different thing: **he matches word with deed.**

Further, according to Confucius, **the superior man is an altruist who provides impartial and equitable service to others.** He is kind and benevolent; he does not repay evil with evil but rather with uprightness. His concern is with reform, not revenge. And his virtuous behavior is a matter of habit that holds even in the direst crisis. For this reason, Confucius believed, **the sage can be counted on at all times. His fairness makes him a figure of trust to all, including the rulers of state.**

The rulers of the Chinese states of Confucius's time did not entrust their affairs to superior men; nor did the rulers themselves merit this title. Instead, those states were dominated by military regimes that ruled by force and were constantly at war with one another, and whose subjects lived in a state of dread. **In the opinion of Confucius, the ignoble policies of such inferior rulers were based on four root evils: greed, aggressiveness, pride, and resentment, which singly or together cause a ruler to rationalize and to excuse the most odious behavior on his part.** Further, according to Confucius, a ruler is invariably the model for the behavior of his subjects, and as a consequence societies ruled by vicious men are themselves vicious societies.

By contrast, a state so fortunate as to be ruled by a superior man, Confucius believed, will be peaceful, secure, and prosperous. Because the superior man is governed by the principle of the Mean, as a ruler he will be unswervingly just and impartial and will seek to establish a fair distribution of wealth, which in turn will promote security and peace. And because his behavior will be emulated by his subjects, he will rule through virtuous example rather than by force of arms. Further, because he is conscientious in his service to all, he will act without fear or sadness.

Confucius's philosophy touched not only on the state and the individual, but also on the family. In fact, for Confucius, the well-ordered family is a model for the well-ordered state and ultimately the world as a whole. The family, Confucius believed, should, like the state, be patriarchal and authoritarian.

Thus, the proper functioning of the family depends on the obedience of the subordinate members and the responsible governance of the parents (and ultimately the father) in accordance with the principle of the Mean and on the fundamental virtues of filial piety and brotherly respect. Together, these two virtues, according to Confucius, allow an optimal functioning of the five primary human relationships generally: those between ruler and subject,

between parent and child, between elder and younger brother, between husband and wife, and between one friend and another. In the well-ordered family, because relationships are clearly defined, life will be stable and will provide the means for all members of the family to develop their capacities to the fullest extent.

**Confucius's ideal of the superior man, who is wise, humane, honest, and just and whose actions spring from morality and not greed or pride; his urging of a society built not on force or military power but on justice and fairness; his belief in the inherent worth, perfectibility, and goodness of humankind; and his overall concern for humanity and human relationship all represented a strong and influential new vision in Chinese thought.**

### **The Doctrine of the Mean**

#### **The Text**

What Heaven confers is called "nature." Accordance with this nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called "education." That which is called Way cannot be separated from for an instant. What can be separated from is not the Way. Therefore the Superior Man is cautious in the place where he is not seen, and apprehensive in the place where he is not heard. Nothing is more visible than the hidden, and nothing is more apparent than the subtle. Therefore the Superior Man is cautious when he is alone. When joy, anger, sorrow and pleasure have not yet arisen, it is called *chung* (**equilibrium, centrality, mean**). When they arise to their appropriate levels, it is called "harmony." ***Chung is the great root of all-under-heaven.*** "Harmony" is the penetration of the Way through all-under-heaven. When the mean and harmony are actualized, Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions, and the myriad things are nourished.

#### **The Commentary**

Confucius said: "The Superior Man actualizes the mean, the inferior man goes against it. The Superior Man actualizes the mean because he is always with it; the inferior man's contrariness is due to his heedlessness."

Confucius said: "I know why the Way is not practiced. The intelligent go beyond it and the dull do not reach it. I know why the Way is not manifested. The 'good' go beyond it and the unworthy do not reach it. There is no one who does not eat or drink, but there are few who really have 'taste.'"

Confucius said: "(Emperor) Shun was so wise! He liked to question people and delighted in listening to everyday speech. He would cover people's bad points and disclose their goodness. He snatched up their excesses and facilitated their balanced nature for the benefit of all. It was in this way that Shun made himself into what he was."

"The Superior Man is harmonious without getting sloppy... He stands in the center without leaning to either side... When the Way is manifest in the land, he is changeless in his support of it... When the Way is not manifest in the land, he will not sell himself out, even until death. How correct his strength is!"

"The Way of the Superior Man functions everywhere, yet is inconspicuous. Average men and women, even if ignorant, know something of it; yet even the sage cannot know it completely. Average men and women, even though lacking in ability are able to practice to some extent; yet even the sage cannot practice it perfectly. The Superior Man treats people as human beings, and once they have corrected themselves, he lets them be. Being sincere and fair to all, though this is different from the Way, it are not far from it. This means "not doing to others what you don't want done to yourself."

"In the putting into practice of virtue or the taking care of speech, if there is somewhere where I am deficient, I certainly endeavor further. If there is excess, I do not dare to merely expend it. His words reflecting his actions, his actions reflecting his words--how can this Superior Man not be sincere through and through?"

"The Superior Man acts accepting his own situation. He does not hope to be somewhere else. When he is in a position of fame and fortune, he acts within fame and fortune. When in a position of poverty and low status, he acts within poverty and low status. When dwelling with uncultured tribes, he

acts as if he is with uncultured tribes. When he is in stress and difficulty, he acts from within stress and difficulty. There is no place where the Superior Man is not completely himself.”

“When in a high position, he does not step on those below him. When in a low position, he does not drag down those above him. Correcting yourself and not expecting things from others, you will not create resentments. You will not resent Heaven above, nor blame men below.”

“The Superior Man abides in change and awaits his destiny. The inferior man practices manipulation and prays for luck.” The Master said: “Practicing archery is like practicing to be a Superior Man. When you miss the bulls-eye, you look for the error in yourself.” “The Way of the Superior Man can be compared to traveling: To go far, you must start from close by. It can be compared to climbing: To go high, you must start from down low. The *Book of Odes* says: “The Happy union with wife and children is like the music of lutes and harps. When siblings all get along the harmony is entrancing. So make your household good and enjoy your wife and children.” The Master said: “Husband and wife should follow each other.”

“The skillful handling of government is contingent upon having the right people. You attract the right people by your own character. You cultivate your character through the Way and you manifest the Way by means of *jen*. *Jen* is ‘humanity’ and its most obvious function is in love for relatives. ‘Justice’ means ‘setting things right’ and its most obvious function is in venerating the Good. The differing levels in loving relatives and venerating the good are expressed through propriety.

“If your rank is low, and you do not have the support of those in power, you cannot hope to have an influence on government. Therefore the Superior man cannot but cultivate his character. Wanting to cultivate his character, he cannot do it without serving his parents. Wanting to serve his parents, he cannot do it without understanding others. Wanting to understand others, he cannot do it without understanding Heaven.”

“There are five pervasive (*ta*) relationships in this world, which are carried out in 3 ways. The relationships are those between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, and between friends. The three ways of practice are wisdom, *jen* and courage, but they are practiced in unison.”

“Some are born knowing it; some know it by learning and some have to struggle to know it. Nonetheless, the knowledge is the same. Some practice it by being comfortable within it; some practice it by benefitting from it; and some have to struggle to practice it. But when the practice is perfected, it is the same.”

“In general, in the handling of the realm, a state or a clan, there are nine basic patterns of treatment. These are: polishing your own character; venerating the Good; caring for your relatives; respecting the high ministers; making the lower ministers feel like they have a significant role; treating the common people as your children; making the artisans feel welcome; treating foreign guests gently and embracing the nobles.”

“Polishing your character, you set up your own Way. Venerating the Good, you are not deluded. Caring for your relatives, then your fathers, elder and younger brothers will not resent you. Respecting the high ministers, you will not make foolish mistakes. Making the lower ministers feel like they are part of it, they will regard propriety with seriousness. Treating the common people as your children, they will work hard. Making the artisans feel welcome, there will be plenty of commerce. Being gentle to guests from afar, people will flock to you from all directions. If you embrace the nobility, the people will have a healthy fear of them.

“Fasting in ceremonial dress, not acting against the norms of propriety; this is how you polish your character. Letting go of slander, freeing yourself from lust, disregarding wealth and prizing virtue: This is how you promote goodness. Respecting their rank, paying them well, going along with their likes and dislikes: this is the way to take care of your relatives. Giving them enough officers to dole out their responsibilities: this is the way to encourage the high ministers. To reward well trustworthiness and loyalty: this is the way to encourage the lower officers. Employing the people around their own farming schedules and taxing them lightly: this is the way to encourage the people. Daily and monthly examining their works and giving merit where due: this is the way to encourage the artisans. Sending out envoys to meet foreign visitors and bestowing kindness and pity on the handicapped: this is the way to be gentle to visitors from afar. To renew their broken lineages, restore their vanquished states, quell their rebellions

and protect them from danger; giving them rich presents and expecting little in return: this is how you embrace the nobles.”

“While altogether there are this nine patterns of treatment, there is a single way to carry out all of them. In all affairs, if you plan ahead you can be successful, and if you don’t plan ahead, you will fail. If you are prepared before you speak, you won’t be tongue-tied. If you are prepared before you begin a job, you won’t have complications. If you are prepared before you act, you won’t have to be sorry. If you are prepared before teaching, you won’t run out of material.”

“Again, if you are in a position of low rank, and you have no influence above, you will have no way of governing people. Even though there is a way of influencing superiors, if your friends don’t trust you, you won’t be able to influence superiors. Even though there is a way of gaining the trust of your friends, if you have discord with your relatives, you will not be trusted by your friends. Even though there is a way of having harmony with your relatives, if your character is not sincere, you will have discord with your relatives. Even though there is a way to make your character sincere, if you have not awakened to your goodness, you will not be able to make your character sincere.”

“Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. Making oneself sincere is the Way of Man. If you can be perfectly sincere without effort, without a mindfulness to its attainment, and walk embracing the Middle Way, you are a sage.”

“If you are working at making yourself sincere, you must find your goodness and hold fast to it. You must study it broadly, investigate it in detail, deliberate on it carefully, discern it clearly and practice it universally. Where there is a lack in your understanding, or your study has not yet reached the point where it is effective, don’t just leave it. When there is something you have investigated, or investigated but not understood, don’t just leave it. When there is something that you have not yet discerned, or discerned but not yet clarified, don’t just leave it. When there is something you have not yet practiced, or have practiced, but not yet universally, don’t just leave it. If someone else gets it in one try, I will try one hundred times. If someone else gets it in ten tries, I will try one thousand times. If you are able to follow this Way, then even if you are stupid, you will become enlightened. Even if you are weak, you will become strong.”

“Only the perfect sage of the realm possesses the acumen, sharpness and insight necessary for overseeing things, and at the same time has enough generosity, open-mindedness, warmth and flexibility to accept everything. He also has enough energy, strength, firmness and gumption to maintain what he has and enough self-awareness, gravity, centeredness and correctness to be respected and enough refinement, principle, depth and analytical ability to discriminate. Extremely vast, unfathomably deep--he uses his abilities according to the situation. As vast as Heaven, as deep as an abyss, when he shows himself, there are none who do not respect him. When he speaks, there are none who do not believe him. When he acts, there are not who do not appreciate him. Therefore you can hear his name overflowing from the central kingdoms out to the uncivilized regions. Wherever boats and wagons go, wherever human power can reach to; in every place supported by the Earth; those places illuminated by the sun and moon; wherever dew and frost fall; wherever there are breathing beings, there are none who do not respect him and cherish him. Therefore he is associated with ‘Heaven.’”